SHAKESPEARE'S FAME STILL "IN ITS GREAT MORNING"

Famous and Popular at Thirty, His Name Has Grown to Overshadow the World of Letters

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I HAVE never been able to discover the origin of the American colloquial phrase, "big four." Did it originate with the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis Railroad or with the famous baseball infield, Brouthers, Richardson, Rowe, and White, bought by the Detroit Club from Buffalo? In railway circles the appellation has acquired dignity, being printed on the formal stationery of the road it designates; but my inquiries, directed to high officials, have elicited only confessions of ignorance.

Be this as it may, and I shall be grateful for verifiable information on the subject, it is rather curious how often this phrase may be justly applied in the history of genius. In military annals there is an exclusive big four—Hannibal, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon. True again in music—Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner, (all Germans.) And true in poetry—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe.

Some forty years ago Edward Dowden remarked that Shakespeare's fame was in its great morning. It is a fact that his reputation was never greater than in this tercentenary year, and I suppose there are daily converts. He is, as he generally has been, a "best seller"; only where trashy novels sell by the thousand, he sells by the million. The popular vote which places him at the head of the noble army of poets has given him such a crushing majority that it might just as well be made unanimous. There was a time 200 years ago when it was comparatively safe to attack him, but now the recoil of that particular gun is so much greater than the discharge that both Tolstoy and Bernard Shaw found themselves in an attitude that made the skillful laugh and the judicious forget to grieve. Tolstoy complained petulantly that when he derided Shakespeare people would not listen to him: "I spoke against him to Turgenev," he said bitterly, "and Turgenev refused to argue; he merely turned away without a reply."

Shakespeare became a famous and popular writer before he was 30 years old; and there has never been a month from that time to 1916 when he was not well known among English-speaking people. In 1592, when he was 28, he had already begun to conquer London, as we learn from Robert Greene's envious death-bed gibe. One of Greene's accusations is obviously aimed at Shakespeare; but the publisher's apology for some of them cannot be proved to allude to our poet, though cited as fact in every biography of Shakespeare I have read. Chettle's apology is certainly handsome: "I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes." We cannot prove that Chettle had Shakespeare in mind.

In 1598 Francis Meres named Shakespeare as having won eminence both in tragedy and in comedy. Perhaps no man knew Shakespeare more intimately than his friend Ben Jonson; so early as 1598 Shakespeare had acted in Jonson's comedy, "Every Man in His Humour," and his name is mentioned high in the list of the cast. We can be absolutely certain that the picture in the First Folio looked like Shakespeare, because Jonson declared it to be an admirable portrait. And we are justified in holding an exalted opinion of Shakespeare's character, because he remarked, "I love the man and do honour his memory, on this side of idolatry, as much as any. He was, indeed, honest and of an open and free nature."

The greatness of Shakespeare's plays was not only recognized by his contemporaries, it was discriminatingly and intelligently appreciated. The distinguishing marks of his genius were clear enough. Modern literary critics cannot add much to Ben Jonson's splendid lines, published in 1623:

To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare: and what he hath left us.

Soul of the age!
The applause! delight! the wonder of our Stage!
My Shakespeare, rise: I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
A little further, to make thee a room:
Thou art a Monument without a tomb;
And art alive still, while thy Book doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give. * * *
And tell, how far thou didst our Lily outshine,
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line.
And though thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek,
From thence to honour thee, I would not seek
For names; but call forth thund'ring Æschilus,
Euripides, and Sophocles to us, * * *
To life again, to hear thy Buskin tread,
And Shake a Stage. Or, when thy Sockes were on,
Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all that insolent Greece, or haughty Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time! * * *
Nature herself was proud of his designs,
And joy'd to wear the dressing of his lines! * * *
The merry Greek, tart Aristophanes,
Neat Terence, witty Plautus, now not please,
But antiquated, and deserted lie,
As they were not of Nature's family. * * *
Sweet Swan of Avon! what a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appear,
And make those flights upon the banks of Thames,
That so did take Eliza and our James!

I can never read these lines without a lump in the throat, because they show such intense personal affection. They also exhibit an admiration so overwhelming—and admiration was not Ben's most notable characteristic—that the author was willing to place his friend above his revered classical gods. Such language, applied to any other poet, would have seemed to Ben flagrant blasphemy. And the revelation of the writer's heart is beautiful. Edwin Booth once defined a Christian as one who could rejoice in the superiority of a rival. When he penned these lines Ben Jonson was not far from the kingdom of God.

Eight years before Shakespeare's death the piratical publisher of "Troilus and Cressida" said in the preface, "This author's comedies are so framed to the life that they serve for the most common commentaries of all actions of our lives." This single sentence sufficiently accounts for the popularity of Shakespeare in 1608, 1916, and—2198. The year that tribute was written a boy was born in London named John Milton; when he was 22 he wrote an epitaph on Shakespeare in which he called him "Dear son of memory, great heir of fame."

The distinction between the art of Shakespeare and the art of Jonson was just as patent and just as well understood by the critics then as it is today. In "L'Allegro" Milton wrote:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learned sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.

It has never been better summarized. Jonson's learned industry and Shakespeare's fine, careless rapture were stock subjects for literary comparison in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Tennyson and Browning were a godsend to sweet girl graduates in late Victorian days. Milton's statement of the poetic maternity of Shakespeare made a tremendous impression on the English Romantic School in the mid-eighteenth century; they never wearied of repeating it.

Shakespeare *and* his creations

(The Davenant Bust, 1662)

From an early nineteenth century engraving

Dryden's attitude toward Shakespeare was like all his other attitudes—resembling a time-table in that it was subject to change without notice. But Dryden, who had a hospitable mind, steadily grew in appreciation of the ever-living poet. A study of the references to Shakespeare in Dryden's works, taking them in chronological order, brings out the fact that, after years of resistance, Dryden finally made an unconditional surrender.

In the eighteenth century the most conspicuous antagonist of Shakespeare was Voltaire, and there can be no doubt that his continued hostility did much to retard the growth of Shakespeare's reputation among French critics and readers. Even so late as 1760 he wrote in English to a British friend (and I am copying directly from his original manuscript): "Though I do not like the monstrous irregularities of Shakespeare; though I admire but some lively and masterly strokes in his performances, yet I am confident nobody in the world looks with a greater veneration on your good philosophers."

Nor was there ever a time between 1616 and 1916 in England when Shakespeare criticism contained more ludicrous curiosities than during the early years of the eighteenth century. In 1721 Dr. Atterbury wrote to Pope: "I have found time to read some parts of Shakespeare which I was least acquainted with. I protest to you in a hundred places I cannot construe him. I do not understand him. The hardest part of Chaucer is more intelligible to me than some of those scenes, not merely through the faults of the edition, but the obscurity of the writer, for obscure he is, and a little (not a little) inclined now and then to bombast." That audacious faker, David Mallet, who stole the ballad of "William and Margaret," retaining the credit of its authorship for over a hundred and fifty years, wrote a verse-criticism of Shakespeare that for infelicitous illustration can hardly be paralleled:

Now eagle-wing'd, his heavenward flight he takes;
The big stage thunders, and the soul awakes;
Now, low on earth, a kindred reptile creeps;
Sad Hamlet quibbles, and the hearer sleeps.

A contemporary of Mallet's, the poetaster William Hamilton, had more than Shavian audacity, for he "versified" parts of "King Lear" and "Hamlet." Here is an example of his skill in transferring Hamlet's soliloquy to the popular metrical measure:

My anxious soul is tore with doubtful strife,
And hangs suspended betwixt death and life;
Life! Death! Dread objects of mankind's debate!
Whether superior to the shocks of fate,
To bear its fiercest ills with steadfast mind,
To Nature's order piously resign'd,
Or, with magnanimous and brave disdain,
Return her back th' injurious gift again.

Horace Walpole said of "Midsummer Night's Dream" that it was "forty times more nonsensical than the worst translation of any Italian opera books."

The romanticists loved and revered Shakespeare, nor had they any difficulty in seeing his enormous superiority to the Augustan deities. The most conspicuous leader in the Romantic revolt was of course Joseph Warton, who in 1740, when only 18 years old, wrote defiantly:

What are the lays of artful Addison,
Coldly correct, to Shakespeare's warblings wild?

The most solidly practical services rendered to Shakespeare in the eighteenth century were by Theobald in 1734 and by Capell in 1768. Each of these men published a text of Shakespeare, which from the point of view of scholarly accuracy superseded previous editions.

In the history of Shakespearean criticism no foreign writer deserves more credit than Lessing, perhaps the greatest literary critic who ever lived. In his extraordinary papers on the Hamburg Theatre, which began to appear in 1767, Lessing absolutely routed Voltaire; he proved that Shakespeare was a truer follower of Aristotle than the French dramatists; he made clear to all Europe the transcendent excellence of the Englishman. Since that time Shakespeare has been idolized in Germany. The German stage has treated him far more reverently than the theatres in England or in America, and the German people have ten times more opportunity to see the masterpieces of Shakespeare than have the people in London or New York. Indeed, if one wishes to see the lesser plays of Shakespeare it is necessary to buy a ticket to Germany. In Berlin and in Munich I saw three dramas that to the best of my knowledge had never been given in any English-speaking country during my lifetime—"Measure for Measure," "Troilus and Cressida," and "Pericles."

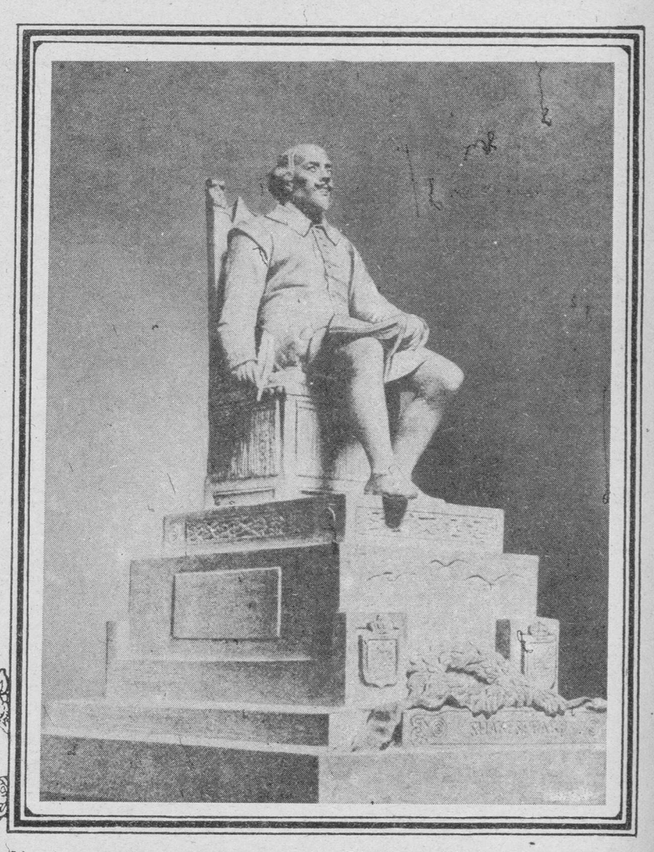
Although the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries survive today only as dramatic curiosities on the stage, played by societies and university students, Shakespeare himself is in the twentieth century as he was in the sixteenth the most popular playwright. When he is intelligently presented there is no modern dramatist half so interesting. Salvini, Edwin Booth, and Richard Mansfield knew how to make Shakespeare interesting and attractive; and in more recent years the New Theatre production of "The Winter's Tale," directed by that admirable actor, Louis Calvert, was simply thrilling. It is a fortunate thing for America that Mr. Calvert has decided to become an American citizen; and it is my hope that he will have many opportunities to produce the plays of Shakespeare in American cities.

Every lover of the ever-living poet should have within reach the new Life by Sir Sidney Lee, an accurate and judicious biography; he should also own every volume of the New Variorum edition, to which three generations of the Furness family have contributed. As a loyal American, I take pride in the fact that the most scholarly edition of Shakespeare that the world has ever seen comes from America; it is not only the best edition, it is indispensable. Is it not pleasant to reflect that the first thing done by any scholar in the world when he plans to print something about Shakespeare, is to consult the Furness volumes?

As a world conqueror, Shakespeare makes all military heroes seem insignificant. Napoleon left the boundaries of France smaller than he found them. All the results of warfare are trivial in comparison

Curious Blindnesses of the Eighteenth Century—How Germany Came to Know Him

An English Conception *of* Shakespeare
From the Gower Monument at Stratford-on-Avon



Shakespeare *as seen in* Hamlet's land
A statue in Denmark by L. Hasselriis

Milton's "Epitaph on the Admirable Dramatic Poet, W. Shakespeare."

WHAT needs my Shakespeare for his honour'd bones,
The labor of an age in piled stones?
Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
Under a star-y pointing pyramid?
Dear son of memory, great heir of fame,
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Has built thyself a live-long monument.
For whilst to th' shame of slow-endevoring art
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving,
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;
And so sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

A German View
The statue by Otto Lessing at Weimar

An American View *in* Central Park
The statue by J.Q.A. Ward

William Basse's Poem, to Which Ben Jonson Replied

RENOWNED SPENSER, lie a thought more nigh
To learned Chaucer; and, rare Beaumont, lie
A little nearer Spenser, to make room
For Shakespeare in your threefold, fourfold tomb.
To lodge all four in one bed make a shift,
For until doomsday hardly will a fifth,
Betwixt this day and that, by fates be slain,
For whom your curtains need be drawn again.
But if precedency in death doth bar
A fourth place in your sacred sepulchre,
Under this sable marble of thine own,
Sleep, rare tragedian, Shakespeare, sleep alone:
Thy unmolested peace, in an unshared cave,
Possess as lord, not tenant of thy grave.
That unto us, and others, it may be
Honour hereafter to be laid by thee.